

# **Special Studies and Evaluation**

Office of Policy and Evaluation California Department of Education

# **Evaluation of California's Class Size Reduction Program**

The California Department of Education (CDE) awarded a four-year contract for the statewide evaluation of the Class Size Reduction (CSR) initiative to the American Institutes for Research (AIR) and four subcontractors: RAND, Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), WestEd, and EdSource. Together, these five organizations make up the CSR Research Consortium. The California Educational Research Cooperative (CERC) at the University of California, Riverside is also collaborating on this research.

#### **Background**

The Class Size Reduction Program in California was established in 1996 to improve student achievement in the primary grades. It gives districts the opportunity to reduce class size to a maximum of 20 students per certificated teacher in kindergarten through grade 3. Prior to CSR, California had one of the highest studentto-teacher ratios in the country (roughly 30 to 1) and California students performed well below national averages in standardized assessments of mathematics and language arts. Prototype studies of class size reduction in Tennessee found positive effects on achievement, particularly for "at risk" students. However, these experiments were conducted on a small scale under supportive conditions. No one has ever attempted to implement a program on the size and scale that California is doing, and the student population in this state is the most diverse in the country. Thus, California's Class Size Reduction Program raises questions that have not been addressed anywhere else. This evaluation is mandated by SB 1777, the legislation that authorized the Class Size Reduction Program. It is based upon a research plan adopted by the State Board of Education in November, 1997.

### **Focus of the Evaluation**

The evaluation addresses four main questions regarding the CSR Program:

 Do smaller classes help improve student achievement, particularly reading achievement of first and second grade students?

- How has CSR affected special student populations (special education students, English language learners, etc.)?
- What staffing challenges do districts and schools face in implementing smaller classes and how has CSR affected the qualifications of teachers?
- What promising practices can be identified to improve the statewide implementation of CSR?

#### Methodology

The evaluation will be conducted over four years starting in May 1998 and ending in March 2002. The CSR Research Consortium raised funds from foundations to begin survey data collection in the spring of 1998. For this initial effort, AIR and RAND selected a statewide random sample of 125 districts, 625 elementary schools within these districts, 1500 teachers (grades 1-3 only) within these schools, and 1000 parents of grade 3 students at these same schools.

The research team is employing a variety of data gathering methods, including further surveys of district administrators, school principals, and teachers; in-class observations of reduced and non-reduced classes; case studies at selected districts and schools; and the use of SAT9 scores from California's Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program. The team will also use existing CBEDS and CASEMIS data files from the CDE and SABE/2 scores (a Spanish-language test of educational achievement) from a sample of districts with large proportions of Spanish-speaking students.

## Report of Findings

The CSR evaluation is designed to supply a series of annual formative reports due on June 30 of 1999, 2000, and 2001 as well as a final summative report on March 28, 2002. The formative reports will provide information that the state, districts, schools and teachers can use to better implement smaller classes. The summative report will present the cumulative effect of reduced class size and supply an overall indication of the program's effectiveness.

The first annual report is now available at the CSR Research Consortium's website, <a href="www.classize.org">www.classize.org</a>, in three forms: a summary of findings for the lay audience (28 pages in PDF format), the full Technical Report (242 pages in PDF), and an Executive Summary (16 pages, PDF and HTML versions).

#### **Contacts**

To learn more about the evaluation of the Class Size Reduction Program, you may contact:

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This summary was prepared by Special Studies and Evaluation (SSE), Office of Policy and Evaluation, California Department of Education. The summary and other information about SSE services and products are located on the Internet at <www.cde.ca.gov/ope/>.